

Exhibit 8

IN GAZA, PEACE MEETS PATHOLOGY

By Michael Kelly;
Published: November 27, 1994

THE MAIN ENTRANCE TO THE GAZA STRIP IS an ugly thing, raw as a sore, bleak as an illness. The Erez checkpoint, as it is called, has been for 27 years the main gate of one of humanity's larger holding pens, and its form has followed its function to a brutal conclusion. It is a clutter of small, shabby buildings set in a landscape of dirt, old asphalt, razor wire and, especially, concrete. Concrete is the checkpoint's grossmotif, in the form of the rough cubes that are, literally, its building blocks. The massive squares are staggered in a slalom course in the strip of road that leads to the stopping point, and are stacked atop each other to form the crude watchtowers and machine gun nests from which the soldiers of the Israeli Defense Force stare down: hard, brown young men, opaquely impassive behind their sunglasses, M-16's at the casual ready. The blocks are painted in bright regimental colors, but concrete grimed by diesel exhaust and gouged by would-be border runners and bullets is hard to prettify.

Gaza's checkpoints (Erez is only the first among many) are a physical manifestation of the reality of the Palestinian experience, which is nowhere expressed in a more pure or concentrated form. The Gaza Strip is a small, misshapen rectangle of generally barren land tucked into the corner formed by the meeting of Egypt, Israel and the Mediterranean Sea. For most of its history, it has been sparsely populated, and its people always have been poor and powerless. They have lived under the control of armed outsiders for hundreds of years: first the Turks of the Ottoman Empire, then the British, the Egyptians, the Israelis. On Sept. 13, 1993, on the White House lawn, Yitzhak Rabin of Israel and Yasir Arafat of the Palestine Liberation Organization signed an agreement that made this place the heart of something called the Palestinian Autonomous Region -- an odd, ambivalent entity that is no longer a ward of the Jewish state but not a state of its own either. The pact also made Arafat the head of the Palestinian National Authority, a government that doesn't entirely exist or entirely not exist, but, in Cheshire cat fashion, fades in and out of reality depending on the angle and the time at which it is viewed.

The handshake on the South Lawn brought a new group of men with guns to Gaza -- the P.L.O., un-diasporizing from Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Yemen, Egypt, Algeria and the Sudan. It is to the more sardonic Gazans a perverse and amusing fact that the new Palestinian regime not only failed to remove many of the hated checkpoints but actually added new ones. The Israeli checkpoints remain, but for every Israeli post there is now a Palestinian one. The Palestinian checkpoints are poor cousins to the Israeli ones, smaller and shabbier. The guards, reedy boys and old men in vaguely matching uniforms, sit in the dirt drinking tea and wave amiably at passers-by; they lack the hard efficiency of real soldiers. The most obvious difference is in the paint job; the Palestinian blocks are painted in the green, black, red and white of their revolutionary flag.

On July 1, 1994, the day Yasir Arafat arrived in the Gaza Strip to establish the Palestinian National Authority as a fact on the ground, the Palestinian blocks at Erez were decorated with posters of his face. Arafat never saw the historic sight. The President of Palestine, as he prefers to be called, was not allowed by the Israelis to enter through the front door of his new home. Barred from setting foot on Israeli soil, he was obliged to arrive by the tradesman's entrance, coming to the promised land over the Sinai Desert from Egypt, to arrive at the somnolent border town of Rafah in the midafternoon of a hot, still day.

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The procession from the border to Gaza City was meant to suggest triumph, and instead achieved chaos. It was a multicultural motorcade, a rolling illustration of the bromide that beggars can't be choosers, composed of the borrowed cars of many nations: from America, the big camouflage-green Chevrolet Blazers driven by the Palestinian National Authority's National Security Forces. From Italy, the blue Fiats of the police force. From various Arab states, the white and red ambulances of the Red Crescent Society, the Islamic answer to the Red Cross. From Israel, the (stolen) B.M.W.'s and Volvos of the local Fatah Hawks, the terror wing of the Arafat's Fatah party. There must have been 70 or 80 vehicles, snaked out over a couple of miles along the narrow road, all of them whipping along in a honking hysteria -- the fat generals of the P.L.O. and the slim boy gunsels of the Hawks leaning half out of windows, perched on roofs, standing on bumpers, waving their Kalashnikovs, shouting and screaming and firing in the air. In the middle were a dozen or so cars and trucks bristling with rifles, surrounding a royal blue Mercedes-Benz limousine, from a square hole in the roof of which appeared a flash of the man himself, a small gray face under the trademark black and white kaffiyeh, his pendulous lips set in a wide, fixed smile, waving his right hand as steadily as a metronome.

Gaza City is at its core old beyond history, and like most such places has grown in idiosyncratic ways far beyond the point of rationality. It is the city as chaos theory, a warren of dark alleys and twisting trails that are more potholes than pavement; of sheds and shacks and lean-tos, apartment blocks and concrete refugee shelters and mosques and sweatshops; of men and women and endless children and donkeys and roosters and skinny orange cats; and over it all, an endless drift of trash.

In this closed and wretched place, the end of the Israeli military curfew and of the intifada has occasioned a sort of population explosion; free to move safely for the first time in seven years, Gazans now go outside almost all the time. Even on a day of no particular moment, the streets of Gaza City are thick with people at nearly all hours, and for the occasion of Arafat's arrival they were jammed nearly to impassibility. The security forces and the police were ignored and overwhelmed. At one intersection, I counted 26 uniformed men, shouting and screaming and waving their hands in motions variously commanding and beseeching. They had no more effect than cartoons. The mob was so thick and strong that the motorcade could only move with it, proceeding in a crawl that eddied around the immovable -- a stalled taxi and a pair of red-haired goats eating something in the road.

The procession led eventually to what was to be the great event of the day: Yasir Arafat's homecoming speech, to be delivered before the grateful masses at the central sports stadium. When the event actually occurred, at about 4:30 in the afternoon, it fell oddly and embarrassingly flat. The crowd was a great deal smaller than anticipated -- probably somewhere between 15,000 and 20,000 people, pressed sweating together under a baking sun in a dirt field -- and from the beginning they did not seem much impressed with the speaker. Arafat, a small man with narrow shoulders and a little potbelly, was dwarfed by larger men on a crowded stage, and he spoke briefly and baldly. He must have known what the people wanted to hear: the good, old, rich stuff of blood and struggle and victory, of pushing the Jews into the sea and taking Jerusalem. But he couldn't deliver the goods.

The awkward truth was, he was now in political business with the Jews. They were his partners in the peace process, and his future depended entirely on the success of that process. He was no longer working in the blood-and-victory line; he was a diplomat and a bureaucrat. He was no longer the romantic leader of an outlaw army in undying opposition to authority; he was authority. He spoke accordingly -- sober, rational and practical. He barely touched upon the subject of the Jews. He talked of work to be done, of heavy burdens to be shouldered, of shared responsibilities. The audience listened politely, but people began wandering away well before he finished.

I WONDER, NOW THAT THE DEEP FLAWS that were built into the experiment of Arafat and the city-state of Gaza (and into the larger experiment of peace between Israel and the P.L.O.) are so obvious, whether Arafat understood the hints of disaster that were

present that first day. Probably. He is smart enough. But perhaps not. At the core of what would go wrong in Gaza and in the Israel-P.L.O. peace process are Arafat's own flaws, and they are the sort of flaws -- incompetence and vanity and prideful delusion and impotence -- that most people would naturally shrink from seeing in themselves. All the same, the hints were not subtle. Beginning about the time the President of Palestine entered his Autonomous Region by the back door, I spent five weeks or so in Gaza. I went there thinking I would see something along the lines of the birth of a nation, but what happened was more of a protracted stillbirth. Three months later -- six months after the Israelis left Gaza to the Palestinian National Authority, a little more than a year after the signing on the White House lawn -- the contradictory pressures incorporated within the structure of the arrangement threaten its continued existence.

Faced with conflicting demands from the Israelis, the West and his own people, and also from within himself, Arafat is losing control of a situation he never grasped firmly. Having rejected, as contrary to the spirit of self-rule and his own pride, the requests of foreign nations for an accounting system that clearly shows how money donated to the Palestinian National Authority is spent, he has attracted only a tiny piece of the nearly \$1 billion pledged for Palestinian support this year. The authority, consequently, is broke, unable to finance basic functions of government. The P.L.O.-Israel peace process has been repeatedly stalled by events within and without Arafat's control, and each breakdown has further set back the possibility of a larger Palestinian entity under Arafat's leadership. Increasingly, the Israelis and even some West Bank Palestinians are showing a preference for dealing instead with Arafat's old enemy, King Hussein of Jordan. Indeed, many Palestinians suspect that the Israelis made peace with Arafat only to remove him to the isolation of Gaza, while they pursued a separate and more promising peace with Hussein. Meanwhile, in Gaza, support for Arafat and for the peace process has in recent weeks approached the vanishing point.

The great sign of disintegration, and the great force for further disintegration, is the killing, which has picked up smartly in recent weeks. The promise of an end to the slaying and counterslaying that had become the central, awful means of political dialogue between Palestinians and Israelis was the essential point and hope of the deal between Arafat and Rabin. To this end, Arafat had promised to disarm Gaza's terror factions -- the Islamic Resistance Movement, popularly known by its Arabic acronym, Hamas, the Islamic Holy War and his own Fatah Hawks -- and to this end also, he had filled Gaza's streets with his own armed men.

Within a month of Arafat's arrival in Gaza, however, Hamas and the Islamic Holy War had resumed terrorist operations. In August, Hamas operatives disguised as settlers picked up two Israeli Defense Force soldiers hitchhiking and killed them; members of the same group were, a few days later, involved in a shootout with police in Jerusalem. A few days after that, Hamas gunmen killed one Israeli citizen and wounded another six in two drive-by attacks on the road outside Gush Katif, a Jewish settlement in the southern Gaza Strip. The pace quickened in September, and again in October. Last month -- just as Arafat and Rabin were receiving the Nobel Peace Prize -- Hamas killed 2 and wounded 13 in a Jerusalem street attack; kidnapped, exhibited and killed an Israeli soldier, Nahshon Waxman, and exploded a bomb on a bus in downtown Tel Aviv, killing 22 and wounding 46. All told, 90 Israelis have been murdered by Palestinian terrorists since Arafat and Rabin signed the deal that won the prize.

The work of Gaza's gunmen is returning the relationship between the Israelis and the Palestinians to its accustomed base of kill and be killed. On Nov. 2, Hani Abed, a leader of the Holy War, was blown apart in a car bomb explosion in the Gaza city of Khan Yunis; Rabin hinted broadly that the assassination was an act of revenge by Israeli security forces. Nine days later, a 21-year-old Gazan named Hisham Ismael Hamad wrapped several pounds of plastic explosive around his chest and pedaled his bicycle into a group of Israeli soldiers, killing himself and three of them. In a letter he left behind, Hamad wrote, "There is no peace with the sons of monkeys and pigs, the enemies of peace, and no peace with Zionists who killed prophets."

In the face of all this, Arafat is isolated and bitter. He sits, in a small room in a half-finished building on the only decently paved street in Gaza City, surrounded by aides and sycophants, talking in querulous tones late at night about the injustice of it all: "And the money from the donors -- where is the money? We have many promises from the donors, but only a few promises have been implemented. I am speaking of the pledges made at the time of the meeting with President Clinton. You remember, the meeting took place last October, which means approximately 10 months have passed -- and nothing. Not a thing. Nothing!" Around the table, the advisers' heads nod up and down, as the President of Palestine harangues on into the night. Trashing Public Spaces

In the opinion of Iyad Sarraj, any understanding of the problems at the heart of the Gaza experiment must begin with an admission of Gaza's pathology. Dr. Sarraj, a psychiatrist and director of the Gaza Community Mental Health Project, is one of those unfortunate people who are cursed with a clear vision of the place where they live. He sat one morning, drinking Turkish coffee and smoking Marlboros, at a white plastic table in the sand on the Gaza beach and delivered a diagnosis.

Earlier that morning, Dr. Sarraj had opened the 1994 summer beach cleanup program. The Gaza Strip's 46 kilometers of fine Mediterranean shoreline is dirty on a heroic scale, the trash varying from bottles and plastic cups and the grimy translucent skins of trash bags, to bread husks and chicken bones and cobs from the charcoal-roasted ears of corn the beach vendors sell, to hunks of concrete, scraps of wood, shards of glass and twisted metal skeletons of washing machines and cars. One day I saw a dead donkey in the sand. Every year for the past four, Dr. Sarraj has organized an admittedly symbolic effort to clean the beach; the idea is that the sight of children and decent people doing something positive will inspire others towards a more sustained effort at cleanliness.

This year's cleanup began at 8:30 A.M., with 105 children of the Gaza Sports Club lined up in rows, the little boys and girls turned out in new T-shirts imprinted with the face of Donald Duck. The adults gave the children new wooden rakes with red plastic heads and black plastic trash sacks and organized them into squads, one trash-bag holder to every four or five rakers. The children managed by 9:30 to collect 40 bags of trash but by then they were tired and bored. The girls wandered off hand in hand to play in the surf, the boys to chase and punch and kick each other. By 9:40, when Suha Arafat arrived for a photo op of the President's wife cleaning the beach, the only people still working were a group of pale Swedish peace missionaries.

Mrs. Arafat, wearing blue jeans and a silk blouse and little pink sneakers embroidered with tiny blue and yellow flowers, accepted the rake handed to her with a giggle and a slightly quizzical look, as if she had never held such a thing in her hands. But she worked enthusiastically, even after the photographers got their pictures and left, and filled three bags by herself. It was shortly after she departed that Dr. Sarraj offered his diagnosis, starting, in keeping with the theme of the morning, with a few reflections on the relationship between Gazans and garbage and the state.

"For hundreds of years, public spaces here have been in the control of occupiers -- the Turks, the British, the Egyptians, the Israelis -- so people developed an attitude of: 'So what if they are destroyed, so what if they do not function? It doesn't matter,' " he began. "Moreover, during our centuries of occupation, we learned to excel, as all occupied people do, at subverting authority -- at stealing, at evading authority, at thwarting the wishes of authority. Corruption has long been regarded as a way of striking against the occupiers, and so, curiously enough, has polluting. People think that if they put garbage in the streets, it is an act of defiance. And so, traditionally, the identity of the Palestinian is very much restricted to the private world -- to the family, the house -- and there is no real identity with the public sphere, or with any authority. To change this will take a long time.

"Consider just the matter of health care," he went on. "After the Israelis withdrew, the health services began trying to organize themselves, but still, as with everything else in Gaza, it is very chaotic. We have very good surgeons, very good nurses, people who function very well independently. But no one functions as part of a cohesive whole, part of

an organized system. Most of the doctors are very concerned with their private practices. Hospitals are used as reservoirs for private practices. If you go to a hospital, and seek a diagnosis from a doctor there, he will see you for one minute if you are lucky, and you will get the message that you are not going to get decent treatment unless you go to his private practice and pay him his fee.

"And the chaos and corruption is not limited to health care; it is universal. Since the Israelis left, it is staggering. You cannot send a letter from Gaza anymore, because there are no stamps. There have been stamps printed, we are told, in Germany, but they have never been made available here so, effectively, there is no functioning postal system. And telephones -- we've been waiting for a new telephone line for my clinic for four months.

"And listen, we are still in the honeymoon. The worst is yet to come. The worst is that we will be a complete police state: corruption, dictatorship, chronic pockets of violence. Oh yes, I think this is inevitable. The P.L.O. as a machine is not ready for government, and definitely it is not ready for democracy. Democracy means accepting that the people in the street are allowed to pose a threat to the people in power, and the P.L.O. cannot even contemplate that idea.

"If the P.L.O. is going to function as another form of dictatorship, people will continue to refuse to identify with anything in the public sphere, which means, of course, that they cannot really identify with the concept of a state or a nation. They suffer en masse here from the psychology of the victim, alternating between sustained periods of dependence and outbursts of defiance. They will remain as they have long been, alienated from the state."

The doctor's pessimism may sound exaggerated, but it is actually a model of reason and restraint. In coming to Gaza, Yasir Arafat took on responsibility for a deeply sick society. Of the strip's 850,000 residents, approximately 643,000 are refugees, more than half of whom live in extreme poverty in camps built decades ago as temporary housing. The population density in the camps is among the highest in the world -- in one camp the number rises to 100,000 per square kilometer -- packed in crude one-story concrete and tin shelters.

The economy is chronically weak and dependent on Israel, which is virtually the sole support of Gaza's farming, fishing and small manufacturing operations, and which provides Palestinian day workers with low-paying jobs inside Israel. Gazans with work permits leave their homes at 4 or 5 A.M. every workday to walk or hitchhike to Erez, where they queue up in a long shuffling line to be examined and passed through metal gates, like cattle chutes. During the Persian Gulf war, when the Palestinians openly cheered Iraqi missile attacks on Israeli homes, and in the years following, which saw a great increase in attacks on Israelis by Palestinian terrorists, Israel cut the number of Gazan entry permits from about 60,000 to just under 11,000. Consequently, unemployment in Gaza now runs at more than 50 percent. The average man marries by 25, and the average family size is 4.7 people, which means that most unemployed Gazan men are responsible for the care of at least several children.

Apart from a brief period in 1956 and 1957, Gaza has been under the control of either Egypt or Israel since 1948, and has never developed a functioning government. The departure of the Israelis -- who stripped government buildings to the bare walls before they quit Gaza -- left the United Nations Relief and Works Agency as the real provider of the services that government is supposed to supply. Most of the territory is poor, sandy and rocky, and most of the land that has been developed for modern agriculture is still owned and occupied by Israelis (who, in fairness, are the ones who improved it in the first place).

Almost all the public land -- streets, sidewalks, parks and beaches -- is fouled with trash and garbage, a layer of filth that covers the ground like an oil slick on the ocean, thickening here and thinning there, but never entirely disappearing. One evening, I came across a small mountain of burning cattle carcasses. The boys who had set it afire (it's the

fat that burns) were playing on top of the heap, grimy-cheeked and golden-red in the sunset amid the flies. The Gaza strip produces approximately 720 tons of solid waste every day, and there is no coherent system for handling it. (In the refugee camps, and in a few neighborhoods bordering the camps, the United Nations maintains a rough system of trash collection. In most neighborhoods, residents rely upon donkey-cart trash haulers.)

Water in Gaza is scarce and heavily polluted. In the camps, and in some of the poorer neighborhoods, sewage and waste water run in a thick, greenish-brown porridge through shallow gutters cut into the concrete alleys, to collect in great open pools situated in low areas or to run into the sea where Gazans swim and fish. The storm drain and sewage treatment systems were long ago overwhelmed by a population that has more than doubled in 30 years. One clogged and broken main in Gaza City has been sending up a geyser of yellow-brown sewer water through an open manhole in the street for so many years that the locals refer to it as the Eternal Fountain, and drivers use it as a landmark.

Apart from rain, the sole source of sweet water is an underground reservoir. With Israeli settlements, Israeli and Palestinian farmers, eight refugee camps and four major cities (Gaza City, Rafah, Deir el Balah and Khan Yunis) all drawing from it, the aquifer is being depleted at more than three times its annual rate of replenishment. The result is a steadily dropping water table that is becoming increasingly contaminated by salt water. United Nations technicians believe that, barring drastic measures of water conservation and management, most of Gaza's water will be too brackish to drink within a matter of perhaps 10 years or so. Trashing Authority

Of all of aspects of Gaza's pathology, none is more dangerous than its politics, which suffers from a simple condition that produces profound side effects: politics in Gaza expresses itself through illegality. In a society under occupation, what inevitably becomes recognized as the legitimate expression of political will is always, in one way or another, illegal. That is, it is dedicated to the refutation or subversion of those in authority, and their laws. Gaza, for all practical purposes, has been occupied forever, and its politics have evolved to the point where anti-authority has become true authority. Almost anything a citizen might want that authority is theoretically in a position to control -- an Israeli work permit, decent medical care, a telephone line, police protection, an electrical hookup, a civil service job -- is mostly unavailable through official channels but may be obtained on the political black market through bribes or the bartering of favors and influence. A few rich, powerful families -- the Shawas, the Middeins (Freih Abu Middein is Arafat's Minister of Justice) and the Samhadanas chief among them -- dominate business, politics and society, manipulating everything from construction to the practice of medicine.

One morning, after a night of dysentery, I visited a doctor to get some antibiotics. Gaza is desperately short of physicians, and in a properly constituted society, this doctor, smart and well educated and ambitious, would be regarded as a treasure. Instead, 16 months after he returned to Gaza upon finishing his education in Czechoslovakia, he remained unlicensed and therefore unemployed. He worked a bit, illegally, out of a pharmacy owned by a cousin.

"Here, you have to have protection to get anything done," he said. "If you don't have protection, you never get work. There are people who do not have medical degrees who are working as doctors because they have protection. It works like this: if you come from the right family, a famous or rich family, everything is open to you. But if you do not come from such a family, you must pay money to the head of one of those families, or to someone at the appropriate ministry, if you want to get anywhere. In medicine, for example, you must work for one year as an intern before you can get a license to open a practice. But you have to get on a waiting list to get that job, and if you don't have money or come from the right sort of family, you can spend years on that list. It is a system of class perquisites such as might have been practiced in England in the 18th and 19th century, where the sons of the aristocracy automatically got all the good jobs in the military, or in the Government, whether they were idiots or not.

"And there is rampant stealing of the money that does come in here. For instance, the

U.N. supplies medicine, paid for by Western aid, and the amount of medicine that comes in should be enough. But so much is stolen for sale on the black market that medicine is very hard to come by after the first week of the month, when the shipments come in.

"Listen," he said. "There is no chance of building an economy on our own. That would take billions and billions of dollars, and well-qualified and honest people, and hard work. And those things do not exist here. The good people leave if they can. A smart, hard-working Palestinian can make \$5,000 a month in Kuwait, where they will also provide his family with first-rate medical care and education. Here, he might make \$300 a month. Why shouldn't he leave?"

The familial arrangement of power complements and overlaps the underground political structure formed by the factions of the intifada, which began in the Jabaliya camp in 1987. They were, by 1994, a contentious lot, including Arafat's own Fatah, or Palestinian National Liberation Movement; Fatah's quasi-independent terrorist offshoot, the Fatah Hawks; George Habash's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (P.F.L.P) and the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a P.F.L.P. splinter group. All of these groups trace their foundation and their ideology to the Marxist secular liberation movements of the 1950's and 1960's. Much more recently, fundamentalist religious factions have risen to prominence. Chief among them is Hamas, which was founded in Gaza in 1987 by the quadriplegic cleric Sheik Ahmed Yassin.

The combination of tribalism and factionalism defines life. Everything in Gaza -- every neighborhood, every civic association, every block, every family -- is identified by its factional and familial fealty; any child can tell you which neighborhood is Hamas and which is P.F.L.P. and which is Fatah, and which also is Shawa or Samhadana, and how all of this is related. (The Samhadanas, for instance, are a much feared Fatah Hawks family; the Nuseirat and Sheik Radwan neighborhoods of Gaza City are Hamas strongholds.) While in Gaza I came due for a haircut, and I asked a friend to recommend a barber. He asked me if I preferred a Fatah cut or a P.F.L.P. I chose the latter -- short sideburns, closely trimmed temples, a bit longer on the top -- and we went to a barber who specialized in that.

By 1994, Hamas had become the dominant faction in Gaza, because of what might be called its big-tent approach. To those who sought purity and rigor in rebellion, it offered the only school of revolutionary doctrine more pure and more rigorous than that of Marx, that of God. To those who appreciated practical results, it offered a substitute for government that was second only to the United Nations, providing basic services through a network of clinics, schools, day care centers, mosques and small factories, and through a welfare system that aided widows, orphans and cripples of the intifada. And, of paramount importance in a system wherein the highest expression of political will is to kill, Hamas surpassed all other factions in killing power.

Hamas began its terror campaign in 1989, acting first against Israelis, but soon broadening its threats to include suspected collaborators and, later, those accused merely of violating Hamas edicts. In 1990, the group founded an underground military wing, the Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades (named for a revolution-minded Islamic cleric killed by the British in Palestine in 1935). The Qassam Brigades, while never rising in numerical strength to more than a few hundred men, soon achieved a deserved reputation for murderous fanaticism impressive even by local standards. Hamas fighters were famous for never surrendering to arrest; if cornered, they killed until killed.

Hamas is tireless in its efforts to build its bank of potential martyrs, as I found visiting a summer camp for boys run by its social work wing, the Islamic Society. The camp was a weeklong affair, with 450 boys from 8 to 15 attending day sessions at a mosque in the middle of Gaza City. When I arrived at the mosque in midmorning, the boys were all sitting in the dirt in the big central courtyard, having a snack of hard-boiled eggs, bread and orange drink. Afterward, they marched inside for the work of the day, which was revolutionary indoctrination. They split up, by troop, to classrooms formed by sheets hung from ropes to serve as dividers.

In one room, several dozen boys watched a television set playing a long and tedious videotape celebrating the death of Usama Husaid, a relatively recent martyr, having gone to Paradise on Dec. 14, 1993, as a result of a suicide car-bombing attempt. Husaid was shown going stagily through some training exercises, running and skulking and crawling about in an olive grove. He was brandishing a Kalashnikov, but he did not really look like a fighting man; he wore eyeglasses, sported a neat little accountant's mustache and was dressed in slacks and shirt with a cardigan sweater. He seemed slightly puzzled by his own activities, in the manner of a Peter Sellers character: Inspector Clouseau in disguise as a terrorist. And, in fact, he had been a Clouseau-ish sort of hero. His bombing run, my escort noted mournfully, had "succeeded in killing only himself." Still, he was a bona fide martyr, and the boys gazed upon his video image in evident worship. Killers as Superstars

It was delusion on a grand scale to think that a political culture defined by the idea that established authority is illegitimate would suddenly discover the virtues of cooperation merely because the nature of the authority changed. And it was a delusion that Hamas lost no time in dispelling. One day about a week into Arafat's theoretical rule of Gaza, and about two weeks before Hamas began its current killing spree, I went to a Hamas rally in the Jabaliya refugee camp, Gaza City's largest. The point of the rally was to express defiance of -- even contempt for -- Arafat and the peace process to which he was wed. The featured speakers were leaders of the outlaw Qassam Brigades.

"My brothers, the battle hasn't started yet!" shouted Muhsin Abu Ita, a Qassam street leader who was the featured orator. "As long as there are prisoners in Israeli jails, as long as the Israelis exist in our land, as long as there is a single settler on our land, the battle isn't finished!" Abu Ita then moved to directly challenge Arafat on the central issue, his pledge to disarm Hamas. "The Islamic Movement will never hand over its weapons," he declared. "And the fighters of the Islamic Movement ask your blessing to use those weapons in the fight for our freedom."

On cue, a car roared around the corner, scattering the people in front of the stage, as a young man leaning out a car window fired his Kalashnikov into the air. The shooter, I was told, was Qamel Katel, a fugitive wanted by the Palestinian National Authority police for the recent shooting of two suspected collaborators. For Katel to show up in the middle of the day, shooting off his rifle only a few miles from where Arafat sat in his office, was a neat bit of nose-thumbing, and the crowd cheered in delight.

This sort of open defiance was more or less routine from the beginning of the Palestinian National Authority's arrival in Gaza. At a P.F.L.P. rally, also in Jabaliya, I heard Abu Ali Nassar, recently released from an Israeli prison, win applause with his jeering dismissal of the peace accord. "The martyrs didn't die for the self-rule of Gaza and Jericho," he said. "The men who were crippled, who were imprisoned, who were assassinated, they didn't struggle to achieve this goal." And at a large Hamas rally in the city's central Palestine Square, I heard speakers accuse the Palestinian Authority of violating its promises of democratic rule and acting instead as "a military authority," language that was, within the context of Gaza politics, a clear signal that Arafat's government was to be regarded as an occupying force. The Hamas leaders at that rally gave broad hints of the escalation to killing. "Although all of the factions are unhappy at this point, we are still agreed not to use violence," said a Hamas official, Khalid Hiadai. "But the people will not accept to live for long under an authority that satisfies no one with its policies." On the edges of the crowd, the police and plainclothes security officers only watched and listened.

The police did not act because they dared not. From the beginning of Arafat's rule in Gaza, there was an understanding that -- despite its public protestations to the contrary -- his authorities would not seriously attempt to deliver on Arafat's promise to disarm the intifada gunmen and establish real control over the street. Maj. Gen. Nasr Yousef, the director general of P.N.A.'s security forces, and the overall chief of the authority's 7,000 soldiers, intelligence officers and policemen, made this clear in an interview. "The problem is that we are dealing with a generation that is very difficult to control," he said, leaning forward over his crowded desk in his office on the third floor of the old Israeli central prison building in Gaza City. "This generation has been bred in the habit of carrying

weapons; they regard it as one of their legitimate rights, even though it is now illegal to carry weapons." He paused, so that his chief aide, a former television broadcaster named Farid Assalya, could light his cigarette.

"Therefore," the major general continued, "in this first stage, we are focusing on an awareness campaign, teaching people that it is no longer necessary to carry weapons. And, now, we are beginning to move beyond that to confiscate some weapons. Yet, we have also adopted a policy that we will not detain the men whose weapons we are confiscating, we will not arrest or prosecute them. This is a balance, a compromise, that we believe is necessary because of the crisis suffered by this generation."

What Nasr Yousef calls Gaza's generational crisis is what Dr. Sarraj calls its pathology; the romanticization of violent death runs deep throughout all levels of Gaza. The intifada's shooters and bomb-throwers are Gaza's superstars, celebrated figures who swagger about like Texas football heroes, worshiped by younger boys and treated with deference even by their elders. Girls and foreign correspondents flock to them. Their lives have a Huck Finn quality; in a culture otherwise very serious about parental discipline, education and hard work, they are exempted from the grind by their willingness to kill and be killed, and are allowed to stretch out for years in protracted adolescence, hanging out in the boy-heaven of their safe houses and hidey-holes, playing with other boys and guns.

To end the killing, Arafat's government must defeat not just Hamas but this entire culture; must defeat, as Nasr Yousef acknowledges, a generation. I gained some understanding of how extremely difficult this task is in talking with Arafat's own young superstars, the Fatah Hawks. The Hawks were theoretically brought under control before Arafat arrived in Gaza, and many had been given jobs within the new National Security Forces, mostly as bodyguards. In truth, I found, their new loyalty was fragile, and their desire to return to the old days of potshotting Jews, palpable.

The Shabura Camp, in Rafah, is a stronghold of the Fatah Hawks; the local head is Arafat Abushabab, a slim 19-year-old who has yet to muster a decent beard. I visited him one day in his clubhouse, where he sat on the sofa, flanked by two buddies.

"If I had a choice, I would prefer to be the President myself, but I don't care if I am only a soldier," he said. "I don't mind being the little Arafat." But the tone of his voice was more mocking than reverential, and his friends greeted the remark with laughter. "We are afraid to offend Chairman Arafat," Arafat Abushabab said, to more giggles and grins.

I asked him if he could foresee a time when the Fatah Hawks might turn against the new authority, and he turned serious. "If the government treats the people in an unjust way, we will stand against the government. If they starve the people, if they stop people from marching in the streets, we will turn against them."

He reminisced about better times. "I miss the shooting of the Israelis," he said. "I hope the Israelis come back again, so we can shoot them again. I always dreamed of the day the Palestinian troops would come to Palestine. Now, I hope we go to war against the Israelis and take all of the West Bank and all of Palestine." False Security

Even if Palestinian National Authority forces should seriously try to disarm Gaza's underground, it is doubtful they would succeed. The authority's armed forces are much weaker than Arafat pretends and a great deal weaker than the Israeli Defense Force, which failed to defeat the intifada in seven years of near war.

At first glance, in Gaza City, Arafat's strength looked impressive. The streets were filled with men in uniforms. The blue-shirted police, who were mostly Gazans (and, not accidentally, mostly unarmed) directed traffic and hung somewhat listlessly about street corners while the men Arafat had brought with him to Gaza, the olive-uniformed ex-Palestine Liberation Army soldiers and the plainclothed spies and bodyguards of the secret police units, strutted through the city, racing their big Chevy Blazers up and down the streets, gunning their engines and sending up air-wakes of dirt and gravel.

But the impression of power was false, as was hinted one day when Arafat went to a ribbon-cutting ceremony at an orange juice factory. The procession was conducted with the usual elephantine display of strength: 10 army trucks, two black Mercedes limousines, three ambulances, seven more army trucks, 16 assorted cars carrying various officials and extra bodyguards. After it was over, as the motorcade moved slowly away, several of Arafat's senior bodyguards -- middle-aged men of considerable heft -- leaped upon the rear trunk of his Mercedes, holding onto the car with one hand while they brandished their Kalashnikovs with the other. The intention was to emulate the United States Secret Service. But Arafat's car lacked hand grips, which are essential for this sort of thing, and as the Mercedes gathered speed it hit a small bump, sending fat men flying through the air, their bulky forms describing jumbled parabolas of arms and legs and Kalashnikovs, to land with thuds and oaths on the road.

In several weeks of touring military and police facilities in Gaza and Jericho, I found that the military and police units of the Palestinian Authority had almost none of the equipment, supplies and facilities of even the most basic security force. They worked in offices and barracks that had been denuded by the departing Israelis. They survived by begging -- except for elite headquarters, intelligence and presidential security units, no army or police command had an operating budget. For office furniture, the police were dependent on the gifts of citizens. In some areas, they depended on local charity even for their uniforms and their food; local tailors sewed outfits for them out of donated cloth, and housewives delivered daily rations of soup and rice to soldiers on duty at Palestinian checkpoints.

On paper, Gaza's policemen and soldiers were well paid -- approximately \$900 a month for an officer and \$500 for a regular cop or soldier, compared with an average Gazan's salary of about \$300 a month. But Arafat cut all wages in half in July, and even senior officers were obliged to live in barracks, sleeping on pallets or blankets on concrete floors.

The office of Lieut. Farid al Akhra, commander of the police force of Rafah, was typical: a small, empty room, with a battered metal desk and two metal chairs, and an old filing cabinet. "We started at zero and we have stayed at zero," the lieutenant said. "We have 63 police officers here, for a population of 150,000. We have no radios. We have no police laboratory. We have one patrol car. We have no sidearms, no handcuffs, no batons, no flashlights. We have only one telephone line. The one telephone line must handle all outgoing calls, and of course it is the only line for incoming calls too."

In Khan Yunis, a city of 80,000, the police force consisted of 73 men, most of whom lived in the barracks attached to the station house; one patrol car, no laboratory, no radios, one telephone line. In Deir al Balah, with its 65,000 residents, the same. In all of the Gaza Strip, I saw only one law-enforcement unit that was being trained professionally and with new equipment: an elite, 200-member antiriot squad whose primary job would be to quell the frequent violent challenges to authority that the Israeli authorities so hated and feared in Gaza, and that the Palestinian Authority always understood would be coming for them too.

The members of the antiriot squad were chosen for loyalty and intelligence from the ranks of the Fatah Hawks and from the university, and all were young and fit. I went several times to Gaza City's "Ansar" prison camp -- appropriately enough, the Israeli Army's erstwhile central detention and interrogation center -- to watch the training of the 44 young men of the squad's first class. The trainees had been outfitted with the latest in riot gear: fire-resistant Kermel bodysuits, helmets and vests of Tetranike, a threat-level 2 bulletproof material (it will stop a bullet from a handgun, but not a rifle), heavy-duty clear-plastic full-body shields and Arnold riot batons, made of dense, unbreakable black nylon.

The gear had been donated by the United Kingdom, and two English trainers came with it; an older, Colonel Mustard-y sort named Alan Skelton, and a tough-looking younger man named Tony Houldsworth, who was the chief instructor in public order for the shire of Nottingham.

Houldsworth, briskly commanding in blue jumpsuit and brass whistle, did the real work. By the end of the second day, he had the class sharply marching in goose-stepping unison; stiff-booted legs kicking high in counterpoise to swinging, clinch-fisted arms; and he had taught them the basics of defensive posture: how to make a double line of men appear to be stronger than it is, how to advance and retreat in lockstep, how to reform the line after repelling a rush. On the third day, he taught them how to stand up to Molotov cocktails, a common means of expressing political displeasure in Gaza. The final lesson that day was in the proper use of the baton. The 44 men lined up in full fig, with shields up, helmet masks down and batons at port arms. Houldsworth selected one to serve as a model, and proceeded to demonstrate how to hit a person with a stick. ("One, ankle; two, knee; three, hand; four, elbow; five, collarbone," he intoned.)

"Now, men, this is very important. You must not strike" -- he pronounced it "stroike" -- "the head." The troops looked blankly at him. "You must not stroike the head," Houldsworth repeated. "You must not stroike the head. You must not stroike the head. You must not stroike the head." They looked blankly still. "Major," he said to the Palestinian Army officer in charge. "Tell them in Arabic, please, that they must not stroike the head." The major obliged, and the men nodded, somewhat dubiously it seemed to me, and the trainer led them in the chant again. "You must not stroike the head!" By the time I left, he had them repeating it, like a mantra, the 44 of them mumbling weirdly in the bright sunshine, "You must not stroike the head." Wrong Man, Wrong Place, Wrong Time

A good argument can be made that Yasir Arafat was the worst possible choice to lead Gaza in its perilous experiment with independence. He is 64, and he has spent most of his adult life as a leader of armed, revolutionary forces, an occupation that does not encourage democratic inclinations. He has run the P.L.O. as a dictatorship of disorganization, largely by his own word and whims, and maintaining power by maneuvering his rivals against each other. He is expert in the manipulation of the international press, and also in the uses of terror, but he has never run a government, participated in any traditional electoral process or paid even minimal attention to the conventions of bureaucracy. He has always made his decisions in secret, with the concurrence of a few aides, and has never been accountable to anyone outside his own organization. In every place where the P.L.O. tried to establish a stable and permanent home -- Jordan, Lebanon, Syria -- it has failed, disastrously.

Moreover, Arafat arrived in Gaza in a weak and desperate condition. He took the deal Rabin offered because it was the last, best one he could hope to get. The collapse of Soviet support for Arab states that in turn supported the P.L.O., and the rupture of pan-Arab good will caused by the P.L.O.'s decision to back Saddam Hussein in the Persian Gulf war, had combined to lethal effect. By 1993, Arafat's organization was nearly out of money and in imminent danger of extinction.

Still, there was a momentary opportunity, after the departure of the Israelis in May, to rescue Gaza from pathology; to build a new order, based on democracy and the rule of law, that would establish the idea of authority as legitimate. The failure to do so was ultimately the result of Arafat's failings.

From the beginning of the Gaza experiment, Arafat set out, with conspicuous and purposeful intent, to subvert democracy and the rule of law. His first and most profound step was to announce, 10 days after the White House signing, that Gaza and Jericho would no longer be governed according to the code of military law left behind by the departing Israelis. Without Israeli law, there was, as far as the behavior of government was concerned, no law in Gaza. There was only a criminal code, derived essentially from the old British colonial law. "What this means," said a United Nations official, "is that no matter what action the Palestinian Authority takes, its foundation in law is dubious and open to challenge. The Israeli code covered all the basic laws on banking, insurance, business. Without them, foreign businesses and nations are very reluctant to come in and do business here, because they don't know what law will apply to them."

Having dismissed law, Arafat dismissed order. The Israelis left behind a semifunctioning

civil bureaucracy of about 7,000 civil servants. Arafat's Palestinian National Authority imposed on top of that a second military and civilian bureaucracy of about 8,000 people. But the P.N.A. failed to provide the chain of command necessary to join the two bureaucracies. Instead, as he had always done, Arafat insisted on making all the decisions himself, late at night and largely in secret. Suha Arafat acknowledged as much in an interview in which she defended her husband's antidemocratic rule.

"Now, it is one month since my husband got here, and already they are speaking about democracy, and he is supporting democracy, but at the same time, he cannot go too fast, too deep into democracy, because sometimes too much democracy isn't right, and there is a narrow line between democracy and the misunderstanding of democracy," she said. "Democracy is not terrorism, democracy is not violence. It will take some time, because, don't forget, the people here have never had a leader, a real leader, with them, so everybody wants to go to Yasir Arafat to get their problems resolved. People say that he is a megalomaniac, but that is not it," she said. "It is that people don't want to see any other person. They only want to see him."

The result was a kind of semicontrolled chaos. "There is no unifying structure of command that directs all the pieces, so everything is haphazard," the United Nations official said. "It is all really just in the mind of Arafat."

And the mind of Arafat, it became increasingly clear, was not well suited to the task. On the one hand, it was chillingly arbitrary. Arafat was free to invent law as the moment required, and did so. In late July, for example, he ordered the effective closure of the East Jerusalem newspaper An Nahar, which had offended him with its pro-Jordanian editorial stance. In defending his actions, Arafat told reporters that he had closed the newspaper for its failure to obtain the proper license from the Palestinian authorities. It was a moment Orwell would have cherished: until Arafat spoke those words, there had never been any such thing as a Palestinian Authority newspaper license.

The signal given by the closure of An Nahar was reinforced by two other early missteps: the decision to delay the popular elections Arafat had promised, and his unexpected refusal to seat a municipal council that represented all the political factions of Gaza. (Instead he handpicked a puppet council of wealthy businessmen.) The council Arafat rejected would have been the first effort at representative democracy in Gaza's history. Its loss was widely and bitterly felt.

There were other, obvious danger signs. One of the first was the establishment of a "national" radio news program, to be followed at a later date by the television equivalent. One afternoon at the Palestinian Broadcast Center, I sat in on an editorial meeting run by Farid Assalya, chief aide to Nasr Yousef, commander of the National Security Forces.

"You see, the news must be guided," Farid Assalya explained. " Hamas and these groups, they only want to oppose the process, and they are not helpful, so items about them must be ignored. Right? Because they only want the publicity for themselves, even if it is negative, so it is better not to report about them at all."

Farid Assalya and the editors and writers of the 7:30 broadcast sat around a table on the lawn, going over the news copy typed on carbon paper. It was just after lunch, and the remains of the meal, half-eaten platters of rice and chicken, lay on the ground nearby. The head writer, an old man with the smudged eyeglasses and dirty hands of someone who messes with carbon all day, sat at Farid Assalya's side, taking notes at his direction.

"Now, it is my job to go over each item proposed here for the newscast and approve it or not," Farid Assalya explained. "So, the first item is that the President met with the American and British consuls today to discuss matters of state. The second item is that Maj. Gen. Nasr Yousef officiated at the graduation of a new police class at Raffah. O.K., that is approved. Hmm. Now, we come to a decision. Here, we have an item about a Turkish delegation visiting the President to pay their respects. But there is another item about a delegation from the Palestinian Contractors Association visiting the President; we have to decide which item is more important. Hmm. I think the contractors lead; they are

more important than the Turks." There was agreement around the table. "Oh, but here we have an item that says an important member of the P.L.O. Central Committee from Amman says that he fully supports the new Palestinian democracy in Gaza and Jericho. I think that must go before the Turkish delegation, too. And here is another item that the Fatah committee in Tunis announced their full and absolute support for President Arafat. O.K., that is very important, that goes up very high."

He studied one story for a full minute before firmly crossing it out. "Now, here is an item that is a good example of what I will reject. It is an item about King Hussein of Jordan and the question of Jerusalem. That is of course a very delicate issue, so I reject this item completely."

On the other hand, and of equal damage to Arafat's reputation in Gaza, it soon became clear that there was something weirdly meaningless about the new President's dictatorial ways, an unpleasant contrast between his public posturing and private impotence. I saw this most embarrassingly exhibited on the day Arafat presided over a ceremony marking the construction of a hospital in the southern part of the strip. The hospital had nothing to do with Arafat, was not financed by his government or in any way under his control, but was, like nearly everything else in Gaza, a United Nations project. It was still in the early stages of construction, and there was no reason for any ceremony, except that Arafat's advisers had asked for one, so the President might pose for the press.

We all -- a hundred or so bureaucrats, reporters and hangers-on -- followed Arafat up to the open second story of the main building where the construction supervisor, an Englishman, was waiting with a table-top mockup of the finished complex. Arafat stood behind the table, facing the cameras, and asked questions in a stern voice. When will the hospital be finished? December 1995, he was told. That was too slow, said Arafat, it must be built sooner. "We will be doing our best, Mr. Arafat," the supervisor said. "Hospitals are complicated buildings, you know." Arafat said, sharply, that he was himself an engineer, and that he had in fact once built a hospital himself, but nevertheless the construction period must be shortened. "Yes, yes," said the supervisor, soothingly, "We are fully committed to shortening the period."

"Maybe you can work some more shifts," Arafat said.

"Perhaps that will be possible," said the supervisor.

"Please," said Arafat.

As we were leaving, the United Nations official watched Arafat strutting out in front of the cameras, as the Englishmen and Irishmen of the construction crews watched with amusement, and he said: "Sad, isn't it? He's just a figurehead, of course. None of this is under his control. Nobody wants to put anything under his control. Nobody trusts him with the money."

When will he be trusted with the money? I asked.

The man smiled a small smile. "We'll give it to him when he's ready for it," he said. Whines and Sycophants

It is axiomatic that the less power a politician has the longer he will make you wait for an audience. I spent most of my last week in Gaza hanging about the Palestinian Broadcast Center, watching the guards fondle their guns, the sleekly suited West Bank bankers come and go and the delegations of well-wishers and favor-curriers file in and out for their few minutes in the President's company. When at midnight on my fourth night of waiting my call came, I was led into a small room in the back, where Yasir Arafat sat at the end of a long table, flanked by his senior military and police officers. He spoke for about half an hour, and I think he intended to use the interview to register his strong protest at the treatment he was getting from an ungrateful, uncooperative world, but strength was not what he conveyed. It wasn't so much an interview as a protracted whine, as Arafat ticked off, point by point, all the ways he had been done wrong, all the things that had gone

wrong, all the mistakes that others -- not he -- had made.

"I am sorry to say that the whole implementation is going very slowly," he began. "We were not expecting that the other side -- I mean the Israelis -- would continue backing far away from what had been agreed upon. As an example, the free passage between Jericho and Gaza is still closed. Did you know that? The entrances from Sinai and Jordan are still under their complete control without any Palestinian participation."

So on and on: "And the tax payments we are supposed to receive from Israel. We didn't receive anything yet, except 7.5 million shekels (\$2.5 million), which is peanuts. That's all! Unbelievable. Listen, I will give you one figure. We are importing from Israel around \$1.5 to \$2 billion in goods annually. The VAT taxes on that, which we should get, are 17 percent, which means approximately \$300 million per year, which means \$25 million per month. Where is it? Three months is now past and nothing. Hah! 7.5 million shekels!"

I interrupted. I had heard it frequently remarked in the streets, I said, that the arrangement he had made with Rabin had accomplished little to change Gaza's status as a huge prison, except to add Yasir Arafat to the population of the prisoners.

"Who told you this? Who?"

"Well, it's just something you hear all over the place."

"Where?"

"On the street."

"I challenge you. I challenge you that this has been mentioned on the street. I am challenging you. No! This has not been mentioned. Perhaps the opposition is saying that, but the opposition's view is not what the masses are saying. No, you do not hear this! Not in the streets. It is not so. This is not the opinion of the masses. This is not the opinion of the masses."

"Oh yes, we are facing troubles. We know this is not a picnic, because the other side is not implementing accurately what has been agreed upon. Not to forget, that in West Bank and Gaza, there is deep economic trouble. We have suffered a lot from the Israeli occupation. All our infrastructure has been destroyed. Everything. Even the railways here in Gaza have been removed, yes, even the railways. You know that? Even the railways have been destroyed. So all our infrastructure has been completely destroyed."

He was by now in full rant, his face puffed up in anger. All the aides around the table had careful, agreeing looks on their faces, and were, as always, nodding.

"The whole world has to bear responsibility for this. Because peace in the Middle East is not only a Palestinian need. It is an international need, an American need, a European need, an Israeli need. And they have to bear their responsibility. If they do not, the whole peace process will collapse. And they will have to bear the responsibility for that, and to face it. As I told you, peace is not a Palestinian need only. It is an international need. It is not a joke. This is not Rwanda. You know, peace in the Middle East affects directly the whole international peace."

He paused to take a breath, and I asked a few questions, which he answered briefly and unremarkably. Then I asked about Hamas. I tried to be polite about it. I said that it must be difficult trying to control a group like Hamas, but why hadn't he ordered his army to at least try to disarm the Qassam Brigades? He sighed.

"I haven't Moses's stick, you know. We are doing our best. And even the Israelis with their huge force, the biggest and strongest army in the Middle East, haven't been able to stop them. We are doing our best." A thought came to him: blame the Israelis. "You know, before we arrived here, the Israelis had open markets -- not black markets, open markets -- in armaments here. Within months, 26,000 arms had been sold. I told Mr. Rabin how this had been done openly. Was it by chance? No, it wasn't by chance. It was because some

of the security leaders in Israel were hoping there would be a civil war here.

Perhaps, I said, with the interviewer's practiced sympathy, it was impossible for him ever to disarm Hamas. After all, Hamas was strong, and the Palestinian National Authority was, by his own account, weak. Yasir Arafat rose from his chair to signal the end of the talk. He was coldly angry as he said his final words. "I have my plan, but I am not going to unmask it. I am not going to unmask it."

THAT WAS THREE months ago. The secret plan to disarm Hamas, if there was one, never materialized. Instead, a dismal pattern has emerged, one that is familiar to veterans of insurrectionist movements and fans of "Casablanca." First, a Palestinian kills a Jew, or Jews, eliciting protests and threats from the Government of Yitzhak Rabin. Then the officers of Yasir Arafat go out in the night, or at dawn, and round up 20 or 30 or 50 of the usual suspects, with the understanding that the arrestees are not very likely to be the guilty parties. It is, as a matter of practical politics, nearly impossible for the Palestinian Authority to contemplate arresting the real hit men of the Izadeen al Quassam brigades; they tend to go down shooting, which could easily turn into the sort of thing that starts a civil war. A few days or so after the arrests, the suspects are quietly released.

The arrangement satisfies no one -- naturally, the Israelis object to the meaninglessness of the exercise and, naturally, the Palestinians object to even the appearance of Palestinian authorities acting on Israel's behalf against men who are, after all, only doing what Arafat himself had long deemed right and good. Every new repetition of the cycle erodes a little more of Arafat's credibility with Israel and a little more of his authority over his own people.

My last day in Gaza, I visited a small town near Khan Yunis to collect reports about the local Palestinian Authority military commander, a man named Nabil Abu Batta. With no functioning command structure to keep him in check, the commander had set himself up as a tin-pot sheik of sorts, and had casually shot and wounded a boy who had irritated him in the street. The boy's family included a local journalist, a stringer for the Reuters news agency; he went to the police station to confront the commander. The officer was rude and dismissive; the stringer responded with a threat to bring the case to the highest authority. "I said to him: 'You cannot do this. What about democracy? What about free press? I will bring this to the attention of Abu Amar,' " the stringer said, invoking Arafat's nom de guerre.

"Do not talk to me about democracy," the stringer remembered the commander as responding. "Do not talk to me about Abu Amar. I am Batta. I do what I want. Even if Abu Amar comes here, he cannot tell me what to do."

On Nov. 4, just four months after Arafat entered Gaza, there occurred a small scene of mob violence that suggested that Yasir Arafat was, finally, losing the only real power he ever had, the power of the street. On that day in Gaza City, thousands of Gazans took to the streets to mourn the death of Hani Abed, the Islamic Holy War leader killed by a car bomb. The grieving throng was, by all accounts, closer in spirit to rioters than mourners; they advanced on the Omari mosque, where the funeral was held, shouting the chants of the old days: "Death to Israel" and "Death to America." Arafat entered the mosque surrounded by bodyguards, but they were not enough. The mourners, eyewitnesses told reporters, shouted: "Arafat is a collaborator! Get out of here, Arafat! Get out! You are not our leader!" They called him a traitor. They shoved by the bodyguards and manhandled the President of Palestine so roughly that they knocked his kaffiyeh off his head. They pushed him out the mosque's back door, into the rain.

Arafat now finds himself in a position of desperate weakness. With his performance increasingly questioned even within the P.L.O., he recently summoned the organization's executive committee to Gaza for a show of support; only 8 of the 18 members showed up. On Nov. 18, the power struggle between Palestinian Authority and Hamas finally broke into open street fighting. Hamas militants in a crowd of several thousand worshippers at Gaza City's Palestinian Mosque responded to urgings from the pulpit to throw stones at

the Palestinian Authority police, who had positioned themselves around the building. The police, members of Arafat's crack new antiriot squad, responded with gunfire. As this article went to press, 13 people had been killed and at least 150 had been wounded as the riot escalated into running battles throughout Gaza.

Despite these ominous portents, it is probably too soon to count Yasir Arafat out entirely. While it is true, to paraphrase the former Israeli Foreign Minister Abba Eban's famous remark, that Arafat has never missed an opportunity to miss an opportunity, he also has an extraordinary ability to survive the messes he makes. He has risen from the ashes of self-immolation in Jordan and Lebanon, and he could do so again in Gaza.

But rise to what? When Arafat came to Gaza, he had a chance to transform himself and it, to become the leader not merely of a Palestinian nation of some sort but to rescue Gaza from pathology and himself from decline. His failure has left him on what amounts to a political life-support system. It is vastly in the interest of Israel and the United States that Yasir Arafat remain alive and reasonably well in Gaza. With Arafat in Gaza, Gaza is Arafat's problem, which must be a source of great satisfaction and amusement to many in Jerusalem and Washington. And, to both Israel and the United States, Arafat remains infinitely preferable to the alternative of Hamas. So, no matter how poorly he runs the government, or how unpopular he becomes in the street, he is likely to hang on for at least a while, with the backing of his powerful friends. They will go to great lengths to keep him in his place -- the mayor of Gaza, sitting in a small room in a half-finished building on the only decently paved street in the city, worrying about garbage and municipal budgets, and whether someone will shoot him.

Photos: Checkpoints dot the Gaza landscape. At Erez, thousands of Gazans are herded through on their way to low-paying jobs in Israel. (pg. 58); The Palestinian elite antiriot squad takes a course on crowd control. Among the topics covered: how to shatter a collarbone. (pg. 61); There were admirers to greet when Arafat arrived in July, but he has spent most of his time since isolated and bitter. (pg. 62)(PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEXANDRA AVAKIAN/CONTACT, FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

Michael Kelly, former staff writer of The Times Magazine, is the Washington editor of The New Yorker.

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